

## The Call to Disorder. Asger Jorn yesterday and today

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# The Call to Disorder. Asger Jorn yesterday and today

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- 1 Asger Jorn and Guy Debord, Cobra and the Situationists (and Dubuffet in parallel): recent publishing events in France have earmarked a conspicuous slot for these great critical figures as well as for the movements in which they were the driving force<sup>1</sup>. The Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Strasbourg has thus devoted a retrospective to the Danish artist (*La planète Jorn*), the study of whom, in France, has frequently been confined to his participation in Cobra, while several publishing houses are, at the same time, re-

publishing his most celebrated writings, exhuming hitherto unpublished pieces—texts written in some cases by two authors, the other one being, in particular, that other great figure of Situationism, Guy Debord. In her major monograph about Cobra (fleshing out a doctoral thesis written in 1973), Willemijn Stokvis ably shows how, unlike American Abstract Expressionism, the Cobra movement managed to dovetail two trends: “social idealism” on the one hand, and, on the other, a “plastic jargon”—a specific “Cobra language”, as the author puts it. Among the leading figures of this tendency, Asger Jorn is, beyond any doubt whatsoever, the figure who managed to best convey these two aspirations: mingling theoretical activity, political agitation and artistic creation; taking part in the ideological arena while at the same time taking, in painting, a meandering course, skirting round abstraction and realism, drawing the themes of his primitivism from the old Scandinavian trove.

- 2 The Asger Jorn we get the clearest idea of is the verbose “theoretician” and the colourful “ideologue”. The first texts presented in the anthology published by the Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux-arts (*Discours aux pingouins et autres écrits*) are addressed to the Danish readership: the aesthetic stances on painting and architecture are accordingly the shaky ones of an artist already sensitive to the social implications of the art of Léger and, above all, Le Corbusier, and sensitive, too, if more secretly in his painting, to the seductiveness of Surrealism (Ernst, Miró, Arp). Later on, in the manifestos published in the magazine *Cobra*, from 1949 on, Jorn formulated an aesthetics of “desire”, rooted in references to materialism. But the crux of his theoretical itinerary has to be in the 1950s. As part of the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, created in 1953 with Enrico Baj, but above all alongside Debord, within the Situationist International. A theoretical work, whose essential critical dimension takes the form of many different methods for invading the different sectors of social life and aesthetics. So the book prepared in 1957 with Debord, *Fin de Copenhague*, made up of snippets of images and hijacked writings is, over and above the denunciation of the consumer society, an attack against the established values of the avant-garde. *Pour la forme. Ebauche d'une méthodologie des arts* is more ambitious, bringing together as it does texts written between 1954 and 1957; it comes across as a meta-historical synthesis, where what sticks in the mind above all is anti-functionalism, but which merits a proper analysis, especially where the sources are concerned. (In this respect, might we not recognize in Jorn, who would title one of his 1958 canvases *Verlust der Mitte*, and who had recourse to the concept of the “unknown” in art, a discreet and keen reader of Hans Sedlmayr and Willi Baumeister?). *La Critique de la politique économique* and *La Lutte finale* (1960), both explicitly oriented towards the political sphere—Jorn, let us not forget, was a member of the Danish Communist party in his youth—, are devised as critiques of the economism that governed the Marxist theory of value. Lastly, the long meditation on the war of the sexes, corrected by Guy Debord in person: *La Genèse naturelle. Sur la situation singulière qu'occupent dans l'humanité les mâles* (1963–64), is a decidedly disconcerting attempt to get rid of Existentialism (and, albeit in a more veiled way, to parody *The Second Sex*) which culminates in the invocation of “interplanetary superman” in the age of the Sputniks. Big farce or discourse going astray on pseudo-philosophical tracks? Ironical parable or Marcuse-inspired conceptual rout (*Eros et civilisation* was translated into French in 1963...) and the Spatialism of Fontana? These theoretical impulses can be related to the many different micro-contexts formed by the different movements through which Jorn proceeded. In a nutshell, the accounts published by the magazine *Archives & Documents Situationnistes* help to define some of the

numerous functions that all these speculations might encompass. The anathema pronounced by Jorn on Max Bill in 1954, the excommunication of Baj, and the break with the Nuclear Art movement in 1956, not forgetting the theoretical overkill between orthodox Situationists and the dissident group formed by the magazine *The Situationist Times* created in 1962 by one of Jorn's female companions, Jacqueline de Jong, reveal what the strategic and argumentative share of these discourses might be.

- 3 Yet Jorn sometimes seems quite close to us. It is this paradox which Laurent Gervereau pursues in his *Critique de l'image quotidienne: Asger Jorn*. As a "rhizomatic" artist, if ever there was, his trajectory cannot be separated from the movements, real or make-believe, which he created or flirted with (Revolutionary Surrealism, Cobra, Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalisme, Nuclear Art Movement, International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, College of 'Pataphysics', Lettrist International, Situationist International, Psychogeographical Committee of London-Institute of Contemporary Arts...). As an independent lone-wolf organizer, but one capable of galvanizing energies, Jorn also managed to find a balance between his claimed attachment to the land where he was born and an international stance. And his work comes across today like one of the most radical critiques of industrial capitalism and the system of imagery going hand-in-hand with it. For all this, must we see herein a still valid model of the "artist critic"<sup>2</sup>, in the day and age of network capitalism? Or is it not simply a last "call to disorder", after Dada and the Surrealists, just as there was a "return to order" in other days and ages?

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## NOTES

1. We should also mention the critical anthology being published at the same time in the United States: McDonough, Thomas F. ed., *Guy Debord and the Situationist International. Texts and Documents*, Cambridge, Mass.; London; MIT Press, 2002.

2. Cf. Boltanski, Luc, Chiapello, Eve, *Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Paris: Gallimard, 1999, p. 501.